Redefining the role of the faculty advisor in student electronic media organizations

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Abstract

This paper examines and analyzes the case studies of managers from three college FM radio stations:

Joel R. Willer, G.M.,
KNLU-FM, Northeast Louisiana University,
Monroe, Louisiana

David Payne, G.M., KDCR-FM, Drury College,
Springfield, Missouri

Len Clark, G.M., WUEV-FM, University of Evansville,
Evansville, Indiana

Each of these station managers generated a report which is included in this study about what they found when they assumed their positions, what changes they have incorporated, and what plans they have for future improvement. The areas of focus in their reports include station organization, programming, personnel management, budgeting, managerial styles, engineering, and station control.

This study presents the practical ideas that each of these General Managers incorporated in their student station operations to improve efficiency in nine key areas: 1)better supervision, 2)improved time management, 3)strong personnel management, 4)tighter budget management, 5)task oriented management sequencing, 6)solid staff interpersonal communications, 7)improved discipline, and 8)station re-organization.

It has been said that the only thing constant about broadcasting is change. The perception of what the role of a college media advisor should take can be described as open to substantial interpretation. In some cases, this role is defined in specific terms by the administration. In others, it may be defined by the governing body of the institution, by student government, or may be ill-defined or lack any kind of definition.

Changes often occur when a manager or media advisor for a student media outlet is replaced. The definition of the role of the new media advisor needs to be clearly defined, or the incoming individual may find herself or himself in a quagmire of turmoil and difficulty.

The changes a new manager or media advisor makes can be subtle or drastic. The need for such changes is often based on the severity of the problem(s) as perceived by the new individual coming into the situation. In this study, three student electronic media outlets, specifically FM college student radio stations, are examined. Nine key areas have been arbitrarily selected as areas of examination for this study. They are:

1)better supervision, 2)improved time management, 3)strong personnel management, 4)tighter budget management, 5)task oriented management sequencing, 6)solid staff interpersonal

communications, 7)improved discipline, and 8)station re-organization.

1)BETTER SUPERVISION

KNLU-FM, Monroe, Louisiana

Joel Willer faced several major problems in taking over KNLU at Northeast Louisiana University. Primarily they were administrative challenges. One such challenge was that the station had previously been issued two F.C.C. Construction Permits for facility upgrades without filing the required amendments and was informed that they would have to return to the previously licensed power of 10 watts E.R.P. Another challenge was budgetary: starting the year with a $17,000 surplus and ending with a $12,000 deficit. And, finally, moving to a different studio location and negotiating with another station for the highly-touted broadcast rights to women's basketball games. Joel was also simultaneously teaching a four course teaching load on a nine-month appointment while working on yet another construction permit for an additional station.

Joel Willer stated many of the problems the station had experienced stemmed from inadequate supervision. Since his administration had made clear his designation as Faculty Supervisor rather than Advisor, he knew they anticipated his very active role in being responsible for the station.

One of his first decisions was to reduce the number of middle management personnel at the station: from nearly a dozen "executive staff" positions down to one. Reduction of the middle management overload streamlined communication channels, but reduced the number of educational experiences available for students. This also increased the required task delegation strategies implemented at KNLU.

Closer supervision took the form, as Joel described it, of MBWA or Management By Walking Around. This permitted Joel the opportunity to feel more "in touch" with his staff and to increase his awareness of problems and concerns of the staff.

KDCR-FM, Springfield

David Payne found control problems when he assumed the advisor's duties at Drury College in the Fall of 1991. The Sig Ep fraternity was primarily operating the station and the previous advisor had never visited nor met station personnel. To improve the situation, David instituted several new policies.

Among these, they included:

1)Elections for staff officers.

2)A yearly budget.

3)New rules for governing the station, including attracting one or two new interns each semester to learn the officer's duties, with at least one being female (the station had NO

1)BETTER SUPERVISION (continued)

female staff participation).

4)Candidates for the Station Manager's position had to have served as or interned with the Business Manager. This was to better control the $9,000 budget.

5)Have the university's Student Affairs committee serve as a panel to help select the best qualified applicants for staff positions.

WUEV-FM, Evansville

Len Clark has attempted to make more changes in the area of program content and incorporation of new technologies to improve his station's efforts.

2)Improved time management

KNLU-FM, Monroe, Louisiana

In this area, it would appear that KNLU personnel benefited most through Joel Willer's incorporation of better time management techniques. These were incorporated through a variety of methods, including better meeting management. More specific time management improvements included attention to details like starting meetings on time, limiting meeting length, maintaining a strict agenda, and excluding interruptions, such as telephone calls.

Strong personnel management

The advisors of all three stations included in this study have demonstrated strong personnel managerial skills. Specific observations noteworthy of inclusion in this study are:

KDCR-FM, Springfield

David Payne's establishment of the aforementioned new personnel policies at Drury College was initially a control problem with the Sig Ep fraternity and lack of direct contact management. His decisions to begin holding elections for staff officers, incorporation of one or two new interns each semester to learn the officer's duties, addition of female staff participation, candidates for the Station Manager's position being required to serve as or intern with the Business Manager, and establishment of the university Student Affairs committee to help select the best qualified applicants for staff positions are all excellent examples of strong personnel management.

David Payne took early steps to incorporate these measures. It is important to note that these measures served three goals: they helped solve immediate problems, they built a foundation for training future station leaders with improved budgetary controls, and they established David Payne as the station's primary active leader in all areas.

Strong personnel management (continued)

KNLU-FM, Monroe, Louisiana

Joel Willer's decision to reduce the middle management staff to one also expedited communications and made that individual's role and responsibilities immediately clear. However, this move also required that middle-management person to have good interpersonal communications and delegation skills (or tactfulness) to function effectively. It should be realized that these traits are usually common in any effective management individual (or they can be taught).

Joel Willer did report that, over time, he "has been able to expand the number of students involved in middle-level station management positions, thus expanding the educational exposure."

Tighter budget management

KNLU-FM, Monroe, Louisiana

Although every station can use tighter budgetary controls, KNLU-FM notably required the most immediate attention of the advisor. Joel Willer noted in his report that when he began in 1985 the station began the previous fiscal year with a $17,000 surplus and ended with a $12,000 deficit.

Tighter budget management (continued)

Additionally, the administration made it clear to Joel Willer that the station would be required to balance its budget in the next fiscal year.

Joel related some advice from an accountant friend as part of his solution: "a budget is not a historical document; it is a plan." Instead of approaching each expenditure as it arose, he designed an accurate, detailed budget and used it as a planning tool. In the long run, it saved time and minimized having to switch into a decision-making role, as major choices had already been made with an eye toward the "big picture." As it will become more aware, Joel Willer has been successful in controlling budgetary problems by "planning his work and working his plan" for a balanced budget at KNLU-FM.

KDCR-FM, Springfield

David Payne's budgetary challenge was to have better accountability of how and where money was being spent, as well as by whom. In this case study, the station was apparently within budget and simply needed better accounting practices.

David Payne improved his supervision of the budget by establishing the following breakdowns, by area:

Tighter budget management (continued)

15% contingency reserve for each of the two semester budgets, semester budgets with allocations for salary, travel, equipment purchases/repair, music acquisition, and promotions and give-a-ways. He noted that the fall contingency reserve could be spent in the spring and the spring contingency carried over to the fall, if they were available. David did not specify station salaries or dollar figures for each of these allocations.

Nearly every student media operation can use tighter budgetary controls. However, these two stations needed immediate and noteworthy reorganization of their allocations to enable them to control and account for where monies were being spent.

TASK-ORIENTED MANAGEMENT SEQUENCING

KNLU-FM, Monroe, Louisiana

A task-oriented technique instituted to improve the time management efficiency at his station was to prioritize business items in each day's transactions. Joel would start with what needed his attention first and foremost, and work down the list.

The author's own eight years of experience at commercial station management and ownership found that following these priorities don't always work. It is a great theory, but applying

TASK-ORIENTED MANAGEMENT SEQUENCING (Continued)

this theory can prove to sometimes (and some days) be impractical. This is especially true at a commercial station where the priorities seem to be continually changing. This may well be true of non-commercial stations, but perhaps to a lesser extent in general because the commercial demands are somewhat lessened. The interruptions and changing priorities at your student media station may sometimes seem to be exceptional to this rule.

In the author's experience, it seemed that everyone who approached management felt theirs was the highest priority issue. . .and sometimes their priority did indeed demand immediate attention (like a fire in the power supply of the transmitter: an "unplanned" priority item).

Despite this, being well organized and having written goals and objectives planned for each day is the most efficient way to maximize the efficiency of your time management. In Joel Willer's case, he felt the priorities were set externally: first, he had to take care of the station's legal problems, then the finances, and later the more "internal" goals. The other two station advisors did not relate any task-oriented sequencing techniques in their reports.

SOLID STAFF INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATIONS

KNLU-FM, Monroe, Louisiana

As previously mentioned, Joel Willer's decision to reduce the middle management staff to one person also expedited communications and made that individual's role and responsibilities immediately clear. This kind of move requires that the middle-management person have good interpersonal communications and delegation skills (or tactfulness) to function effectively. The chain of command can be likened to a steel chain in some respects: it is only as strong as it's weakest link. Any breakdown in station management communications will come at the point where an individual lacks interpersonal skills, or fails to pass down important communications from their supervisor.

As Joel Willer reported, over time he was able to expand the number of students involved in middle-level station management positions, thus expanding the educational exposure. It is important in college media that advisors assume the role of being learning facilitators.

By the previously related advisors' decisions to train their future staff members in intern roles and to permit a realistic number of students to assume middle-management positions, they are offering on-the-job learning for students at their stations. They are training their future leaders in such

SOLID STAFF INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATIONS areas as responsible management, accountability for those in their charge, budget control, and all of the areas previously addressed. A student media operation can be one of the best realistic learning situations for future broadcasters and broadcast station managers.

IMPROVED DISCIPLINE

KDCR-FM, Springfield

Although none of the station advisors' reports specifically addressed the area of discipline, David Payne did communicate a problem with theft when he first assumed his advisory position. He related that "the CDs were walking out the door about every three weeks." David did not give a solution to this problem.

However, the National Association of College Broadcasters offers an on-line list server as a service to its members. Recently there has been substantial on-line "discussion" regarding the problem of theft of music (mainly CDs from studios). One solution mentioned limiting their student announcers from wearing overcoats and "baggy" coats into the studio which can serve to hide station materials when they leave. Another solution offered was to have each announcer

IMPROVED DISCIPLINE (Continued)

sign an agreement not to pilfer station CDs. Close inventory of station CDs was also offered as another step to take, as well as having an automated CD changer, if the station budget permits. Another station representative on line suggested monitor cameras installed in the studio, as well as a search of the jock at the end of the shift, but these were quickly rebutted as being too harsh and "prison-like." However, another good idea suggested was to have any announcer bringing in "non-station CDs check them in with someone at the beginning of their shift, and check them out at the end of the shift to assure that station CDs weren't getting "accidentally mixed in" with their own personal property.

In the author's professional experience, the CDs were carted on high output, low noise tape. Often, if the announcer had time, direct-to-air CDs were played, with the carts serving as "markers" to be rotated as "already played" in the rack. Thus, relief jocks could immediately tell what had been played in previous shift(s) over several previous days. However, this was of little help in reducing theft. The author's stations kept a close inventory of all CDs which were spot checked at the end of jock's shifts. This practice helped to keep them honest. However, there are often far fewer air staff personnel at a commercial station than the "high rotation" of personnel at a

IMPROVED DISCIPLINE (Continued)

student media operation. With some block formats, of course, the announcers themselves are the music "experts" who bring in their own CDs. During these times it might be best to place a long wooden (or steel) dowel across the CD shelf and place a padlock at each end to prohibit removal of any CD from the shelf or multiple shelves.

Joel Willer's "Management By Walking Around" technique used at KNLU-FM, as well as simply knowing your personnel and communicating to them clearly why stealing hurts the station are still effective deterrents to help reduce theft. It is a problem that may not be totally eliminated, but these actions can help to reduce the regular occurrence of it. In the final analysis, discipline should be learned rather than experienced first hand.

STATION RE-ORGANIZATION

KDCR-FM, Springfield

Total staff re-organization should only be exercised in the most sever of circumstances. In situations where there is a struggle for control to save and/or improve the station, as was true in the case of KDCR-FM, it is a warranted action. David Payne found the Sig Eps at Drury filling station vacancies with a promising pledge, rather than basing these decisions on

STATION RE-ORGANIZATION (Continued)

qualifications. He also noted the Station Director was also the fraternity president. Theft of station property (mainly CDs) was rampant, there were no established budget policies, there was no weather or news programming, and the previous advisor had never been to the station, had never met with station officers and didn't even know their names. In addition, the equipment was highly substandard, and the control room and production room had major wiring problems. In this case, amputation is essential: a band-aid approach would surely prove futile. In these situations, massive hemorrhaging will result. But the results will prove fruitful with the passage of time. This is a better long-range alternative for the students than having the administrators take the station away from them and make it a "mouthpiece" of the university, or close down the station altogether.

Through his efforts the necessary changes were instituted, and David Payne has happily reported that "during the 1994-1995 year we bought lots of new hardware and had both the control room and the production room rewired by a licensed and experienced FCC engineer.

SUMMARY

All of these advisors have instituted appropriate measures to improve the situations they found when assuming their positions at their respective stations. However, as is often the case, there are always some advisors who take this to an even higher level of accomplishment. Such is the case with Station Manager Len Clark at WUEV-FM in Evansville.

WUEV-FM, Evansville

Len Clark's station epitomizes the result of taking an active role as an excellent station manager: his staff shares common goals of quality and pride. These are goals we should all share and try to instill in our station personnel. At WUEV-FM, this is accomplished by developing a sense of station pride in each staff member. The author would consider this similar to William Glasser's Quality School management technique, where each member of the team shares station goals and clearly knows their role in contributing their own quality work to the overall effort. Glasser's Quality School management techniques are derived from W. Edwards Deming's model which was successfully adopted by Japanese automobile manufacturers against US car makers several years ago.

Len Clark related this "mental image" for WUEV:

SUMMARY (Continued)

"This is WUEV. . .'I'm Patty Lay reporting from the University of Evansville for the Voice of America'. . .Nominees for the Marconi Award for Jazz Station of the Year include WUEV-Evansville, Indiana'. . .'FaithBreak is brought to you by the chaplains office at the University of Evansville'. . .'WUEV--home of the longest college radio broadcast.'" It is clear by his report that station pride runs deep in each staff member at Len Clark's station. He has been successful in instilling a sense of pride and responsibility to do quality work in each of his staff members. This is a goal that should be shared by everyone in college media operations.

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